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How To . . . Write A Grant 101

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Can't We Just Get a Grant for That? Or, Points to Ponder for Proposal Writers
Imagine for a moment that you're a staff member, volunteer, or board member for a community historical society, house museum, or other history organization. Your group has a great idea for a project – maybe a new exhibit of historic photographs, a walking tour of significant sites around town, or rehousing the archival collections. You have looked into what the project would cost, in terms of time, supplies, and services. Everyone is enthusiastic, but there just isn't enough in the budget to cover the costs. You've heard it before, or maybe you've said it yourself: "Why don't we just get a grant?"

Many individuals and organizations find themselves in exactly the situation described above. If you are, congratulations! It means you are thinking creatively, and looking for new ways to serve your audiences through the presentation of history. You are, to paraphrase the expression (incorrectly attributed to Chinese origin), living in interesting times.

The next logical step is for you to find a funding partner for your project. There are an amazing number of grant opportunities out there, and the process of identifying and applying for just the right one(s) can seem overwhelming. Grant seeking is simultaneously a complicated and an extremely simple undertaking. Unfortunately, too many of us get stuck on the "complicated" part and lose sight of the "simple." This article is intended as a reminder checklist of how to stay focused when the question of grant funding comes up. When you hear those words, "Why don't we get a grant," step back, take a deep breath, and ask yourself the following questions:

Is grant money the only option for support here?
Let's face it – some projects are sexier than others. Grant funders, be they individuals, private foundations, or public agencies, are just like the rest of us: they like to participate in the "fun" projects, for the most part (more on this later). Activities that are largely administrative in nature, or that do not have an obvious public benefit, may not be as attractive to potential funders. For these kinds of projects, you may wish to use other sources of operating support, such as admissions, membership dues, endowment revenue, and annual giving (unrestricted donations), and "save" the public projects for grant support.

Do we have time to apply for a grant and wait for a decision?
Applying for grant funding is a time-consuming undertaking. Not only do you need to allow enough time to prepare a proposal (see below), but most foundations and public agencies will take anywhere from six weeks to eight months before letting you know whether your application is successful. If you need the money sooner, you should consider other options.

Do we have the person(s) in place to not only do the project, but actually write the grant?

The most successful grants are usually prepared by a small team of people composed of the project director(s) (the person who will actually be doing or managing the work) and someone who can think critically about the project. This point is not to be taken too lightly. Grant writing is "heavy lifting," and requires concentrated time and energy, not to mention good written language skills. Sometimes one person can perform both roles, but not always. Often it's best to have one person in charge of the project and one person in charge of the grant preparation, including the writing.

Is there a funder out there for this project?
Locating potential grant opportunities usually involves research online (try <www.foundationcenter.org>) and lots of networking. Talk with your colleagues at other institutions and find out where they have applied. Ask your board members if they have contacts at area foundations, banks, or corporations that you know have community giving programs. Read donor lists and annual reports from organizations that are similar to yours. When you visit an exhibit or attend an event, make note of who is credited as a funder on the wall, on the Web site, or in the program. When you identify a potential funder ("prospect" in the grantwriting field), contact each one directly to request application information. These days, most foundations and corporate giving programs publish their guidelines online, allowing you to download them as needed. Whenever possible, try to locate the name of the actual person to whom you should send a proposal.

Have we done our homework?
Grant seeking is like dating: there has to be a match in order for the relationship to work! Not every funder or grantline is appropriate for every project, so be sure to thoroughly read and understand the application information you receive. Most funders have restrictions (geographical, disciplinary, and budget size are the most common) and priorities for the kinds of projects they want to support. If they don't want to fund staff salaries, for example, their guidelines will probably tell you so quite plainly. Funders have developed their priorities based on their own experiences and interests; it's not your place to second-guess them. If you have questions, call and ask, but not before you've read the guidelines. You'll waste their time and yours if the information you need is already there. And don't *call the day before the grant is due to start asking for help!*

Are we ready to go for it?
The answer to this is another series of questions:

- Does this project fulfill our mission?
- Does this project advance our strategic plan?
- Does the board and/or appropriate staff support the project?
- Can we describe our project succinctly?
- Do we know what we want to do?
- Do we know why we need to do it?
- Do we know who will benefit?
- Do we know how we will let them know about our project? and
- Do we know how we will evaluate our success?
- Can we build a defensible budget?

If you can say, "Yes!" to all of the above and you have identified a promising prospect, you should be in great shape to start working on a grant proposal.

Before you go any further, however, go back to the previous question. Have you really read the guidelines? Even if you have already submitted a grant to a particular funder, you should first make sure you have the latest version on the guidelines (don't assume that last year's are good enough!), and then be sure you know them by heart.

Where do we begin?
I always recommend starting a new proposal with the budget. The budget is really a description of your project in numerical terms. The proposal narrative is designed to enhance the budget, not the other way around. Once you have at least a draft budget in place, you'll find that the narrative is much easier to write.

These days, funders really expect your budget to look clean and professional. Prepare the budget on a computer using a spreadsheet program such as Excel, following the format requested in the guidelines. *This last point is crucial.* The foundation or agency has its own reasons for wanting to see your budget in a particular format. Don't question why. Just do it.

Be explicit about which items on the budget you're asking the funder to pay for, which will be covered by your organization, and which will be covered by other grants if appropriate. Again, pay attention to the funding restrictions and priorities noted

in the guidelines – if a foundation says they won't pay for operating expenses, for example, don't request staff salaries in the budget.

Can we make the case?
Again, consult the guidelines. Each proposal narrative will be different. Some foundations ask for a simple letter; others want a formal narrative of ten or more pages. Proposals to Federal agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute of Museum and Library Services might be more than fifty pages including appendices. Each will explain what they expect in their guidelines.

However, most proposal narratives include some common elements:

- The mission of the organization
- A brief description of the organization
- Its history
- Its resources (facilities, collections, staff, etc.)
- Its audience (number and kinds of people served)
- The need for the project
- A description of who will be working on the project
- A description of the intended audience
- The expected outcomes
- A description of how you will promote the project
- A description of how the funder can help
- A description of how you will acknowledge the funder if a grant is awarded

To some extent, you can recycle standard boilerplate text to serve in a new proposal, but always pay attention to what the guidelines say in terms of length and format. "Not more than three pages" means exactly that! Keep your text fresh and responsive by trying to write as much original prose as possible. Use the budget as a guide to keep your project description succinct and on track.

In terms of style, remember what your strictest English teacher in school taught you: avoid the passive voice. Don't use run-on sentences. Be clear and concise. Your paragraphs should contain a minimum of three sentences. If you use abbreviations or specialized language, be sure to explain what they mean. Never assume that your reader has any prior knowledge of your organization or project. In fact, it's a good idea to get someone who is unfamiliar with the project to read your draft and make comments. If you're not the project director, be sure he or she reads it, too. Don't take any criticism of the draft personally. Don't argue if someone "doesn't get it." Go back and rewrite, and do so as many times as needed. Be sure to allow enough time to get it right.

How do we look?
Your grant proposal may be all a funder ever sees of your organization. You want your proposal to come across as talented, professional, exciting, and cost-effective – in other words, as a winner. How do you get your request to stand out from the crowd?

First, prepare the narrative on a computer in word-processing software. Use a standard font in a minimum of 12-point; this is not the time to get cute. As a matter of course, leave a standard one-inch margin on all sides. Don't try to crowd too much onto a page; your proposal should be easy to read. Number the pages, and consider adding a header or footer with your organization's name.

Organize the various sections of the proposal in an orderly fashion. Answer questions in the order in which they appear in the guidelines. Usually, you can use the guideline questions as section headings; doing so emphasizes the fact that you've read them and are aware of the funder's requirements. Don't add a table of contents unless the guidelines specifically request one. Use the spell-checking feature, but don't rely on it. Nothing beats sitting down with a printed draft of your proposal and reading it aloud to catch grammar, punctuation, sentence construction, spelling, and typographical mistakes.

Finally, go back to the guidelines. Make sure your proposal follows the requested format to the "T." If the guidelines say to double-space and use 12-point type, do it! If they say not to enclose the proposal in folders or binders, don't! If they ask for two-page resumes, don't include a fourteen-page Curriculum Vitae. Double-check the math in your budget, even if you've prepared it in a spreadsheet.

Be sure that your proposal is signed by your organization's authorizing official (usually the executive director or board chairperson). (In the case of a letter proposal without a formal signature form, it should be written from your authorizing official to the funder's contact person.) Many funders require additional signatures from the project director and/or fiscal agent. Be sure that all required signatures appear in blue ink on the original copy.

Before starting to make copies, be sure that your proposal looks as perfect as you can make it. Then, verify the number of copies of the proposal requested by the funder, and add one each for the project director, board chairman, and file. Make your copies on a good-quality photocopier, and consider using something other than the cheapest grade paper. When assembling your copies, place the original on top and the copies below; consider adding a Post-It note marked "Original" to the original. Anything that you can to assist the people on the end will be appreciated.

Lastly, consider attaching a cover letter to the stack of proposals. This should be brief, written from the project director or authorizing official to the funder's contact person, describing the request and its significance to your organization. Writing a cover letter is a good exercise because it forces you to describe the project in three or four sentences. Keep a copy for your files, but include only one copy of the letter (the original) in your package.

We've double-checked everything – now what?
The moment has arrived – you've read and reread your proposal a dozen times; you've counted all the copies, double-checked the signatures, and finally you're ready to put the package in the mail or deliver it to the funder's office. What happens next?

Before the proposal package even leaves your organization, start a grant file. Put the file copy you made (see above) into a labeled folder and store it where you can access it quickly (NOT in the back of your car!). When you send the proposal, save the FedEx or USPS receipt in the file; you might need it later to verify that the proposal went out on time. Any correspondence, such as a confirmation letter or log number, should be saved in the file as well.

Now, you wait! I'm crossing my fingers for you….

About the Author
Jennifer Eifrig currently serves as assistant director of heritage programs at the Connecticut Humanities Council, the country's second -largest state humanities council, president of the Connecticut League of History Organizations, and regional chair for the American Association for State and Local History. The director of the Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum from 1999-2005, she also worked in the development department at Mystic Seaport from 1991-1999. Ms. Eifrig holds a B.A. with honors in English from Bates College and a M.A.L.S. in arts from Wesleyan University. When not busy in the heritage field, she is an amateur filmmaker, aspiring novelist, and mother of a one-year-old toddler.